

## Summary of Discussions: The State of the Field in Early Modern Japanese Studies

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At some point during the Hōei era (1704-1710), a low-ranking samurai (*ashigaru*) of Kaga domain, Yamada Jirōemon, edited a collection of materials that various people had been collecting since the mid-seventeenth century. The materials focused largely on the formative years of Kaga domain. In accord with common practice, Yamada gave his work the self-deprecatory title, *Mitsubo kikigaki*, loosely translated as “Three Jars of Jottings on Hearsay.” In part, the inspiration for his choice of title may have been his sensitivity to the unoriginal nature of his work. He was, after all, collecting, editing and transmitting materials that others had researched or that they had written based on their own personal experience.

This essay, based on discussions at the conference on the state of early modern Japanese studies has some of this same character. I wish to stress that this is a summary of the *discussions*, and eschews any effort to summarize the ten papers that formed the basis for them. Nonetheless, a number of the themes noted here also appeared in some form in the essays themselves. Furthermore, the title of Yamada’s collection suggests a metaphor for the major tasks of the conference: 1) to review recent trends in the scholarship, 2) to discuss methodological and theoretical problems of the field at this time and

3) to suggest possible directions for future research in and development of the field, all concerns that lie at the heart of this essay.

### Major Cross-cutting Issues

**1. Different disciplines in “Early Modern (*kinsei*) Japan” do not share chronological bounds and publishing practice can further exacerbate differences by narrowing disciplinary focus considerably.** While the terms of political history often provide the broad framework for much political, diplomatic, intellectual and socio-economic history, historians typically recognize that within large periods, non-political developments might mark important subdivisions. The Tokugawa era lies at the heart of this period on which our essays focused, giving a nod to the groundwork laid during the late sixteenth century.

From the historian’s perspective, the designation of the period as “early modern” began with the publication of *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan*.<sup>1</sup> There is a certain irony in the fact that, despite the title, the essayists’ conceptual discussions, when they characterized the period at all, focused on “feudalism” – “early modern” was not directly defined or discussed and does not even appear in the index to the book.<sup>2</sup> (There can be little doubt that the title of the volume reflects the heavy involvement of the editors and many of its contributors to the conceptualization underlying the conferences and essay collections associated with the Princeton series on Japan’s modernization. In this series, treatment of Tokugawa as an “early modern” precursor to a modern Meiji extended beyond political, social and economic history into the realms of cultural history, too.)

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\* I have attempted to draw examples and illustrations from all of the fields represented at the conference and in the essays *EMJ* has published since, but I have made no effort to discuss each in relationship to the various points that constitute this summary.

I would especially like to thank Patricia Graham for her comments on the manuscript version of this essay. I have also benefited from an extended discussion with her regarding a number of specific issues touched on in discussions at the conference. Brett Walker also made helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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<sup>1</sup> Edited by John W. Hall and Marius B. Jansen, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> The volume’s heavy emphasis on the limitations of characterizing Tokugawa Japan as “feudal” combined with current academic interests in “pre-modern” precursors to Japan’s late nineteenth century rapid economic development and political, social and cultural transformation led most scholars in the U.S. to substitute “early modern” for “feudal” as the standard characterization of Tokugawa Japan.

Historians also widely recognize that if one takes a broadly social or economic historical perspective, a completely different scheme for periodization might result. Indeed, several alternatives were briefly mentioned during the discussions, including some that clearly violated the standard schemes of periodization beloved by political historians.

Yet nothing in this general set of expectations could have prepared the historians in our group (and perhaps others) for the arguments made in the fields of art history and literature. For example, noting the emphasis in art history on the study of individual artists (despite the emergence of post-modernist theory as an important element in the field), Patricia Graham argued that in the major fields of art history, the period would have to begin with the late Muromachi era (mid-sixteenth century, with the flourishing of urban merchant classes) and would not end until well into the late nineteenth century. This is partly because styles change more gradually, without the sharp demarcations based on pivotal events such as those that are commonly invoked by political historians.

The different definitions of the period are inevitably linked to the differing definitions of “modern” applied within disciplines in the U.S. and Western Europe. For political history, the key lies in the emergence of more effective, centrally controlled state apparatus, largely in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In the field of diplomatic relations, the definition is generally tied to the emergence of a system of diplomatic relations based on equality of states as expressed in treaties and an emerging diplomatic protocol in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In prose literature, the issue is linked to the development of the novel. These different definitions are further linked to the historical circumstances in which the Western intellectual traditions began to think of the “modern” as a distinct historical break.

These differences of definition have had consequences that extend back in time, beyond the development of the field in the latter half of the twentieth century. Given the fact that many of the early European and North American scholars worked with Japanese intellectual guides who, by the twentieth century, had developed a pretty

good sense of what appealed to this foreign audience, the tendency was to focus on what was familiar to or resonated with “us” rather than to place principal emphasis on understanding Japan's past on its own terms.<sup>3</sup>

Even if scholars today have an awareness of unexplored vistas, what is published, especially in book form, has often remained quite narrowly focused. In the field of literature, English language publication is trained heavily on Genroku and largely avoids anything else before or after that. The styles of literary expression dominant in the medieval era are treated as though they continued to dominate literary production through most of the seventeenth century. The period after Genroku has largely been ignored, Haruo Shirane argued, because it seems to have little connection to the emergence of “modern” forms of literary expression, notably the novel. From this perspective, “early modern Japan” is, in publishing practice, comprised of just a few decades and the objects of investigation are quite limited.

**2. The field is young and relatively small; publications in many areas are spotty.**

A common thread running through much of our discussion, that there are yet big projects or problems that remain to be undertaken, can in part be traced to the fact that the ranks of laborers in the early modern field are still rather thin. Pre-modern Japan's role as backdrop to Japan's late nineteenth- and twentieth-century transformation provided the major justification for the expansion of the Japan field into the Tokugawa era in the United States. The influence of the modernization problematic – at least in the sense of the Tokugawa–Meiji links in politics, society, economics, literature, religion and thought, if not in the modernization paradigm of the nineteen fifties and nineteen-sixties – remain influential, even if they may be undergoing transformation. Now, for example, in political and social history these days, work bridging the Tokugawa–Meiji divide is more likely to trace the ill effects of the Tokugawa connection than would once have been the

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<sup>3</sup> Recall that many Japanese were trying to prove that they were “civilized” and “sophisticated” like the West, and were assiduously striving to refashion themselves to demonstrate the validity of that claim.

case. Links between Tokugawa and Meiji may not be chronologically direct but nonetheless, the old ties still bind. In art history, *ukiyo-e* prints of the eighteenth century were of particular interest in the West, and associated with the *Japonisme* and Impressionist movements of the late nineteenth century, both reflected the nature of Western interest in Japanese art. That interest remains highly prominent today, to the exclusion of many other styles and art forms.

This leaves relatively large areas of research virtually or completely untouched. This is true not only for fields that have been in vogue recently (e.g., women's history), but also for older "established" fields such as the study of upper class literary genres in which we might typically imagine attention to have been concentrated heretofore, simply by virtue of the fact that a heavy emphasis on high culture characterized literary studies until the mid-twentieth century.

**3. Major influences shaping the early development of the field continue to affect our image of early modern Japan.** Intriguing observations regarding the forces shaping the different fields emerged in the course of discussions. In some cases, a field has been shaped largely by a single individual. For example, historical demography, in its current form, owes everything to the work of Hayami Akira and people he has trained. Literary studies of the period, especially the broad overviews, are overwhelmingly informed by the perspectives of Donald Keene.

In literature, art, religion, and intellectual history, the initial models of academic research applied in the post-war era stressed the creation of a canon to match that of the Western world, and focused on the accomplishments of the great men who produced that work. That approach shaped the selection of subjects even when, as in literature, the focus was on the literature of the townsmen rather than the samurai elites. Indeed, that the bourgeois taste seemed to produce a product that paralleled expected literary developments (the novel) and reinforced the similarities with European literary history.

Of course, upon even slight reflection, we are not surprised at the dominance of a few energetic and very productive individuals and the tendency to mimic existing academic models (especially during the early years of the Japan field in the

North America and Western Europe); we also tend to anticipate that the first studies of political history and foreign relations focus on elite politics.

The realm of art history, however, introduces other powerful forces in deciding what gets studied: the connoisseur, the major art collector, the consumer. Exhibition catalogs, one of the major publication venues in the field of art history, are built around the display of exhibitions that often feature the holdings of a single collector. Collectors' tastes come to define the subjects in art history that get broad exposure here. (There is something of a parallel to this phenomenon in the field of literature where, Shirane noted, translations have a fundamental role to play in stimulating interest in one aspect of the field or another. If the translations are found appealing, they are likely to spark scholarly interest.) In addition, the Bunkachō (Japanese Ministry of Culture), as partner with foreign institutions, has frequently overseen the conception and planning of international exhibitions featuring Japanese art from major Japanese collections. In this way, they exert profound influence on the conceptualization of Japanese art for foreigners as well as control the canon of art objects deemed worthy of study and display.

**4. Scholars generally presume that the era is marked by a sameness despite the fact that notable potential turning points have not yet been examined.** For example, noticeably absent from the English-language repertoire is a full study of that dynamic Shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune. While participants first raised the example of Yoshimune and their belief that his reign marked a substantial breaking point in the context of political history, participants working in other fields quickly identified the same era as marking a major shift in the cultural, intellectual and social spheres as well. That such a consensus developed quickly and spontaneously reinforces the impression that periodizations that divide the Tokugawa are conceivable and worthy of consideration; the possibility even exists that breaks are sufficiently great that they should be treated as marking a shift in era, not just sub-periods within the early modern era.

A roughly parallel situation can be found in the realm of Japanese literature, although there are

differences. Political history often focused on the samurai elites (creation of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, formation of castle towns and domains, land taxation and the like) and gave short shrift to lower levels of political activity; however, the case is reversed in important respects in studies of literature. Our discussion of Japanese literary works after Genroku revealed a rich body of material not yet exploited by English-language scholars. Among the Tokugawa corpus, the works of authors such as Saikaku and Chikamatsu, which are seen to presage the emergence of modern literature, do not come from the elite literary traditions. They represent an important part of the literary culture of townsmen and commoners, certainly not the only group to create literature in the Edo period. The absence of attention given to the literary traditions of other Edo period social groups, such as that created by elite samurai, Buddhists, and intellectuals in the studies our specialists surveyed represents a large void, and failure to treat these genres may create a false impression of uniformity in literary forms and evolution. The omissions included some genres, such as *gesaku*, which are now drawing some attention, but also Chinese-style prose and poetry, Buddhist literature (仏教説話), travel literature (紀行文), essays and miscellanies (随筆), fantastic tales (怪談、奇怪小説), and women writers and poets (all genres). As these attract our attention, we can expect (at the least) that we will have a new vision of the development of literature in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.

**5. The defining characteristics of the period within each discipline are not clear.** At the least, scholars have become aware of a broad range of subjects that complicate past characterizations and hint at the need for something new. Despite this, no one expressed confidence that we currently have sufficient grasp of the overall development within the various areas which comprise the field of early modern Japanese studies to be able to identify distinctive colorings that provide a sense of thematic unity to the period. If this is true within major fields, it is all the more the case if we think about characterizations that cut across fields.

The small number of scholars in the field and the fact that Japanese studies is still rather young

in the U.S., Europe, and Australia, have reinforced early orthodox images of thematic unity to the period in each of its major sub-fields. In politics and foreign relations, the rise of a fairly centralized government under the Tokugawa shogun and the image of a “closed country” (*sakoku*) provided the major themes through the early nineteen-sixties. In the world of art, *ukiyo* dominated our view. The rise of urban literary traditions in prose, theater, and poetry marked the period as distinctive. Almost simultaneously, the emergence of national learning (*kokugaku*) and Confucian rationalism marked distinctive trends in religious and intellectual history. Economic growth, diversification and (more recently) a rising standard of living were treated as the general trend line in economic history. All were viewed as making major contributions to the emergence of a “modern” Japan. Yet most of these developments occupied relatively short spans of time within the Tokugawa era or characterized a relatively limited geographic reach, and the heavy focus on them ignores not only other chronological eras within the period but topics, too.

The late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies generated tremors of discontent with attempts to draw a straight line from Tokugawa to a “successfully modernized” Japan, but the new scholarship that undermines the old images and complicates our understanding of the Meiji transformation came in publications of the nineteen-eighties and nineties. This concern may be most significant in the fields of diplomatic, political, social and economic history. To briefly note several examples: *Sakoku* is now widely seen as a Euro-centric interpretation and while the issue is hardly settled, there is now also much greater stress on the limitations of shogunal authority and domain autonomy of action. Some participants argued that scholars too readily abandoned the utility of “feudalism” as an attribute of the age. A half-dozen monographs in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties used commoner protests (*ikki*) to argue that farmers still had it rough, a claim reinforced by some demographers who took effective potshots at early suggestions that birth patterns showed conscious family planning rather than response to a Malthusian vise. As noted above, the world of arts and

letters is now known to have been far richer and more complicated than previous treatments suggested.

Participants generally agreed that no widely agreed upon unifying paradigm and characterization of the era is likely to emerge until more of the Tokugawa heritage has been explored, and explored in new ways. Art history, intellectual history and religious studies of the period, for example, have been dominated by those in which a scholar analyzes a single, prominent figure; however, that approach has begun to lose its luster and workshop participants across all disciplines have expressed interest in moving away from that model to study the religious practices and intellectual-cultural lives of more ordinary folk. (The discussion below regarding the need to accommodate the multifaceted, syncretic character of artists, intellectuals and religious figures also implies approaches that move beyond traditional practice.)

**6. Regardless of discipline, there was a sense that the field needs to make our work of broader interest.** There was general agreement that early modern Japan specialists talk largely with and to each other or (sometimes only implicitly) to our modern Japan counterparts. To those outside the field, the period is seen as potentially interesting largely in its relationship to characteristics identified as precursors to the “modern” rather than holding attractiveness when treated on its own terms and defined by internal developments rather than its teleological links to Meiji Japan. This appears to be true across all of the disciplines we surveyed. Counterexamples might be offered to suggest interest in Japan from outside the field (sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt and Southeast Asian historian Victor Lieberman come to mind), but these examples are sufficiently rare that they highlight the problem rather than inspire confidence that others take interest in the work of early modern Japan specialists.

Beyond this, however, lies a broader question of how scholars can make this field interesting to people in other professional contexts, and to students and the broader public. While not the subject of extensive discussion, there was general agreement that the latter part of this problem was significant. Indeed, one participant commented

that a review of recent doctoral theses suggested not only that were people choosing (and being allowed to choose) dull topics of limited interest; further, they were also writing in opaque and spiritless idiom.

Participants agreed that this issue could be solved partly by exploring subjects that personalize and humanize our writings on this period. This suggests a need to create less purely scholarly publications (especially those in which scholars of each of the respective sub-fields write mainly for each other) and more attractive materials for classroom use. However, these forms of professional activity tend to be under-rewarded in the institutions whose faculty author most of the publications in the field.

A hopeful note regarding this theme lay in the acute awareness of dynamic stories of change at the family and individual level even in the framework of substantial social and institutional stability. There are at least a few examples of scholarly publication that suggest the feasibility of generating interesting personal detail in the context of scholarly work. Recent work by Ed Pratt in social history, and Melinda Takeuchi in art history come to mind.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, even the inclusion of personal detail does not obviate the challenge of describing social settings, practices, religious concepts, office titles and functions for non-Japanese in a way that is consonant with an engaging and well-written story.<sup>5</sup> Quick shorthands such as describing a *bugyō* as a “magistrate” often fail because the contemporary Japanese office has considerably different duties than a court magistrate

<sup>4</sup> Edward E. Pratt, *Japan's Proto-Industrial Elite: The Economic Foundations of the Gōnō*. Harvard East Asian Monographs 179, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999, and Melinda Takeuchi, *Taiga's True Views: The Language of Landscape Painting in Eighteenth-Century Japan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992, are suggestive.

<sup>5</sup> The world of Tokugawa Japan is sufficiently removed from that of today's Japan to pose a similar challenge even within the Japanese market. One can find a variety of examples, some more successful than others, every Sunday evening on NHK's *Taiga dorama* series.

at the same time in England or France. The challenge of basic translation of Japanese concepts becomes even greater in realms beyond the political.

**7. The polymath quality of many figures in the cultural, intellectual and political world, and the varied economic bases from which they operated strongly suggest the need for cross-disciplinary perspectives if we are to understand influences shaping developments in the late sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.**

Thinkers, preachers, artists and craftsmen, poets, and authors functioned in many contexts. Like their contemporaneous European and Chinese counterparts, they aspired to accomplishment in many fields. The practice of licensure in mathematics and other realms of learning played to the desire of ambitious villagers as well as political and cultural elites who sought to demonstrate their multi-faceted prowess. The time is ripe to exploit this circumstance through both cross-disciplinary cooperation by several scholars and through the efforts of individual scholars to apply multi-disciplinary perspectives and tools in their research.

**8. "Theory" represents one means to cross the divide between Japan scholars and colleagues with other regional – national focus; however, use of "theory" raises questions about 1) the applicability of largely Western conceptual schemes to Japan and 2) the way Japan scholars have used "theory" in their studies.** I place the word "theory" in quotation marks here because current use is typically very narrow. Unmodified, the term these days is often simply shorthand for the theory of literary criticism and post-structuralist conceptualizations. We occasionally find reference to other forms of theory, derived from political science, sociology, or economics, but on the whole, there is a tendency to treat all social science theory as bound up with a discredited "modernization theory" and it is extensively ignored.<sup>6</sup> While early problems

of employing, for example, Weberian theory to study Japan are by now well known, the issue arises in post-structuralist theory as well. As one example, a participant raised the controversial proposal of one scholar that Edo period literature might reasonably be characterized as "post-modern." The question remains as to whether use of post-structuralist theory commits the same errors that brought criticism to the use of other social science theory in Japanese studies: Are the concepts and theories being coarsely imposed on the data without looking carefully at the fit between data and concept?<sup>7</sup>

In this vein, some participants questioned the degree to which heavy focus on theory sometimes became a substitute for analysis of data. In this regard, the area of sharpest contention to date has concerned charges, levelled in the pages of journals such as *Monumenta Nipponica* or *Positions*, of sacrificing accuracy in translation in the name of developing or applying theoretical approaches derived from the work of Western scholars.

Participants who were critical of some of the trends they identified or of specific examples of what they saw as "abuse" of theory were not crying, "Abandon theory!" and to take that as the thrust of their arguments would be a serious distortion. There was a widespread sense that theory (of the post-structuralist, literary criticism type) was inescapable and that it had yielded some productive results; the concern was how to use it in a responsible and productive way to 1) learn more about Japan and 2) to find ways to communicate with non-Japan colleagues. Similar issues can be raised in regard to the use of social science theory in, e.g., the study of political, social or religious history, whether that of grand theorists such as Weber and Durkheim, or that of modern "rational choice" partisans.

Although the above comments reflect the emphasis in this facet of our discussion, a persistent set of additional questions arose regarding an

<sup>6</sup> Chapters of J. Mark Ramseyer, *Odd Markets in Japanese History: Law and Economic Growth*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, and James W. White, *Ikki: Social Conflict and Political Protest in Early Modern Japan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995, represent

two exceptions that specifically employ social science perspectives that are not associated with post-structuralism.

<sup>7</sup> It remains to be seen what reactions will be to the continued efforts of S. N. Eisenstadt and his more theoretically-oriented colleagues. See "Early Modernities," *Daedalus* 127:3 (Summer 1998).

alternate means of expanding our audience: the degree to which late-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth-century Japanese practice was influenced by and could be properly analyzed through contemporary or classical Chinese conceptualizations and practice of literature, art, religion and thought. A consensus emerged that in such fields familiarity with Chinese practices was essential for appraisal of developments in Japan, and fundamental for understanding the degree to which such practices were modified or employed selectively by Japanese artists, thinkers, and religious groups.<sup>8</sup> These concerns suggest the possibility of treating Japan as part of the Chinese cultural sphere – stressing the distinctive features of Japan's use of continental patterns not just their commonality.

**9. Western Europe and the United States may not be the appropriate comparative spheres through which we can reach out to a broader range of scholars.** Implicit in much of the preceding discussion is the expectation that “The West” (western Europe and North America) set the standard for international comparisons to developments in early modern Japan. While not denying that there is merit in some such comparison and for some projects, the question repeatedly arose, “Why are developments in Japan so seldom compared to those of contemporary China, Korea or India, for example?” Family demographic patterns in Japan are clearly distinct from those in Western Europe; might we not learn more about the sources of difference if we also compared Japan's patterns to those of some other non-European society? While the choice of comparison in the case of demographic history may result from lingering influences of the modernization perspective, comparison of artistic and literary practice with that of China, for example, might yield an entirely different appreciation of the “non-standard” literary genre that professors Shirane and Marceau discussed in their arguments. Such studies have appeared in art history and literature in the past fifteen years – e.g., work by David Pollack, Melinda Takeuchi, and Patricia Graham – but even in these fields there was a

strong sense that links with continental culture merit fuller consideration.

**10. Despite the expansion of many cultural fields (literature, art, religion), history, and even social sciences into non-elite subjects among our non-Japan colleagues, the impact of such trends in the English-language literature are recent (dating largely from the 1980s) and still under-developed relative to other regional-national fields.** Among many factors that lead to this end, three stand out. First, the field is still very small and those already established scholars have invested so much in mastering the techniques, conceptual apparatus and vocabulary of their original area of interest that they are unlikely to make a major shift to those research interests that reflect current American and European academic trends. Second, while our students at both the undergraduate and graduate level may get excited about topics and problems that are *au courant*, Japanese language preparation of most of these students is still typically inadequate for them to immediately begin research in pursuit of their intellectual interests. The time lag between the generation of their interest and their ability to act on that impulse is quite long even in the area of modern Japanese studies. The language demands of earlier historical periods require still greater investments of time. Third, in many areas of art, literature, religion and intellectual history, one must understand the practices of earlier eras (and perhaps of China and Korea as well) in order to have an appreciation of developments in the early modern era, adding to the body of preparatory material that one must master before actually undertaking research.

Regardless of the source, the consequences of this situation are clear and suggest some general realms for future research.

- 1) Investigation of the workings of lower levels of society, including popular religious practices, factors affecting family planning such as nutrition and religious belief, popular education and literacy and aspects of material culture.
- 2) Exploration of explicitly religious topics that go beyond the secularized treatments

<sup>8</sup> One of the most readable and effective demonstrations of the modification of Chinese practice and its naturalization in Japan is Melinda Takeuchi's *Taiga's True Views*.

of “Confucian” or “National Learning” scholars and treat their subjects in the intellectual context of the times rather than as stages in the development of autonomous intellectual and religious history.

- 3) Exploration of the links between religion and politics (e.g., the efforts of Matsudaira Sadanobu to use Shingaku for political ends).
- 4) Re-evaluation of the boundaries of, and within Japan during the early modern era (status, class, village, domain, frontiers and international, gender) regarding which participants sense a far greater permeability than had generally been acknowledged. Do boundaries of this sort become more elaborate over time? Do they become more rigid? Or do they weaken over time?
- 5) Re-assessment of the degree of political control of the Shogun over domains, domains over villages and towns, and villages, families and towns over their constituents and changing patterns of different groups’ participation in the political and economic world.
- 6) Rather than looking at the large urban areas as autonomous centers of economic and cultural development, exploring changing patterns of social, economic and cultural interaction between urb, suburb and countryside as geographic mobility (migration, *dekasegi*, pilgrimage), economic diversity, and trade increased during the period.
- 7) Examination of the role of gender and the appropriateness of our current understandings of the role of gender. A number of recent works clearly undermine the rigid gender boundaries that are often presumed to have been operative.

**11. Recent scholarship in most fields creates a heightened awareness of regional diversity.** While scholars presume an urban – rural

divide, the underlying assumption has been that the quality of the divide was generally uniform throughout the land and other regional differences were relatively unimportant. The general pattern of scholarship was to downplay the role of regional differences or dismiss them as exceptions that did not undermine accepted images. That picture has now begun to change. For example, literary studies have made something of a kowtow in the direction of regional variation by noting differences between Kansai-based traditions and those of the Kanto; art history has focused a lot on contrasting Kansai and Kanto artistic traditions as well as connections between them, without actually making that difference the object of study. That focus, and the interrelationship between the two earn greater attention these days, as does the active interaction of rural and urban writers of poetry. In the realm of socio-economic and political history, erstwhile national narratives are under attack and, in the extreme, domains are treated as nearly independent states. Scholars today are more aware of the strong regional variation in the incidence and impact of famines, variation domain responses to economic and population crises, variations in institutional development and domain autonomy. The impact of regionalism can no longer simply be ignored, no matter how much the relative balance of central authority and local autonomy might be debated in specific contexts or overall. In the realm of art history, scholars are increasingly exploring regional differences in craft traditions, especially ceramics.

This consciousness underlay several broader themes that engaged participants. Can we speak of a truly national culture at this point in Japan’s history, one that extends beyond the capital and castle towns throughout the provinces? When do we get a self-conscious sense of national identity and under what circumstances? Is it largely a “positive” identification or created by a “negative” contrast with some “other,” initially situated in East Asia, later identified as the West?

**12. Participants widely expressed a continued interest in exploring more aspects of everyday society and culture.** Some of the comments above suggest this concern, but it is worth repeating here for emphasis. Examined more closely, this interest is not just a simple wish



for more study of ordinary people. To state participant interest in this way excludes concern with the everyday life of elites, also a matter of interest: What was life like at court? For residents of castles? For women of all classes? Just as we asked above, "Can we speak of a truly national culture at this point in Japan's history?" in regard to the regional integration of Japan, we can extend that query across the social strata. Do we have a culture that extends beyond the elites and well into the middle and lower levels of society? If we have evidence that some people thought that they shared a national culture, in what contexts did they sense it, and who within Japan was likely to have this sense? How far down the social ladder does this sense extend?

**13. Interest in new areas of research that moves away from the political and cultural center toward the influences of regionalism, lower socio-economic strata, and everyday practice encourage greater emphasis on the ability to use manuscript materials.** The themes which many scholars now wish to explore and for which conference participants expressed the most interest – greater understanding of the lives of commoners and further exploration of the sources and consequences of regional variation, to name just two – call for work in sources that may not have been transcribed, edited and published in printed form. In contrast to studies of the collected works of famous authors or analysis of top-level domain and shogunal policy-making, the documents that require exploration are incompletely available in printed form, not available at all in printed form, or, in some cases when available, subject to error. A number of scholars – Ronald Toby, Anne Walthall, Janine Sawada, and Lawrence Marceau to name but a few – have already plunged into the world of manuscript sources in order to explore subjects where printed materials presented only a limited opportunity to explore questions of interest. This trend is likely to continue and suggests a clear need to consider how best to fill this need in training graduate students.

### Summary

The preceding observations suggest a number of common issues that cross disciplinary boundaries in the field of early modern Japanese studies. The field is still relatively young, certainly still limited in numbers, and reflects current Western academic fashions at a rather slow pace. The challenges of integrating theoretical perspectives from literary theory, anthropology and other social sciences loom as large today as they did thirty years or more ago, both from the standpoint of the applicability of a particular theory and our ability to use it sensitively with Japanese data.

A major trend in the field is the de-centering of our attention. We are more concerned with non-elite groups and behavior and more aware of diverse regional patterns of social, political and cultural development and interaction than twenty years ago.<sup>9</sup> Participants clearly embraced the intellectual challenge of coping with the awareness of greater diversity and complexity that accompany this multi-faceted de-centering. One task for the field is to determine to what degree such diversity can be used to create new narratives at the pan-Japan level.

This challenge is matched by that of trying to create problem foci that are not slavishly tied to the "the modern" and providing a strong positive identity for the era on its own terms. While modernization theory typically was thought of as applying to political, economic and social concerns, our discussions made it clear that this approach affected the choice of topics for study in art and literature as well. Discussions clearly indicated the limiting our focus to the era's link to post

<sup>9</sup> While discussion above concentrated on the role of literary/post-structuralist theory, theory alone can not explain the range of interests that have been affected by this de-centering. Two alternative examples: In historical demography, it is the very application of statistical methodology, approaches to sampling of data and the like that increased scholars' desire to explore the influences of regional differences. Political science methodology has played a similar role in encouraging recent scholars to think about the distribution of power throughout Japan as well as the activities of state-building.

Meiji Restoration developments distracts us from a variety of significant developments that depart from current emphases.

In some instances phenomena heretofore ignored directly bear on our assessment of how "modern" early modern Japan was. In the field of literature, popular genre of elite literature have been given rather short shrift in Western studies in favor of those that seem to presage the arrival of more "modern" forms of literature such as the novel. In the area of institutional history at the local level, the rather widespread existence of corporate forms of owning and managing arable land tends to contradict the image of near-modern property rights that dominates the field. In other realms, such as the continuing conflicts and tensions between the Shogun and the daimyo and between daimyo and retainers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we have a different appreciation for the nature of the state even if this is treated separately from the question of its contribution to the "modernization" of Japan. From either perspective, we have much to gain by moving beyond investigations of problems that focus on the links between Tokugawa and Meiji Japan.

Both of these concerns underlie one broad question for the field: Wherein lies the dynamic story of the era? The answer to such a broad question will undoubtedly differ with each specialization, as it does today. It is likely to lead to continued variation in the way in which people define the chronological boundaries of the field and its subspecialties.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> These issues of characterization and definition of the period extend beyond simple academic debates. How they are resolved involves power relationships within the profession. Underlying many of the issues we identified looms the big question of who should or will have the principal role in defining the field. Western theorists? Classical or modern Japanese literature specialists? Comparable Chinese specialists? Our Japan scholar colleagues who focus on other eras? The people in the field? Non-Japanese practitioners in comparable American or European fields who make the hiring decisions in departments of history, religion, comparative literature, and art (especially in smaller programs)? To some degree all play a role, but one hopes that those in the field will have the

If the field(s) of early modern Japanese study face large challenges, our discussions also revealed a great optimism and excitement. The current state of the field provides a tremendous stimulus to undertake interdisciplinary study. The importance of thinking about the era from an interdisciplinary perspective was highlighted at a follow up meeting the group had in conjunction with the annual meeting of AAS the year following our conference. Participants then noted that often change within their particular disciplines was motivated by external factors. For example, art was motivated to change by an increase in and changing distribution of wealth as well as new developments in technology. Religion was influenced by economics, literature by changes to demographics (audience) also technology (i.e. development of printing). Indeed, one of the most exciting elements of the conference was the opportunity it gave us all to learn about developments and issues facing fields other than our own and to explore the possibility of using data that is not traditionally employed in one field in a new intellectual arena. This stimulus to interdisciplinary work comes not only in our concern for the polymaths of the age, but also from the increased awareness of the importance of regionalism in socio-economic and political history. One suggestion for multi-disciplinary study of a single region was especially well received – the Shinano region – because there is already a substantial clutch of studies that touch on this region.<sup>11</sup> In the future, interdisciplinary work may help to provide a deeper understanding of early modern Japan, a fuller awareness of characteristics that usefully define a distinctive era of Japanese history, and provide a firm basis for integrating a study of early modern Japan with historical and cultural developments in other parts of the world.

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primary role, especially in the area of faculty hiring decisions.

<sup>11</sup> There is already a core of people who have published on at least some aspect of Shinshu: Laurel Cornell, Selcuk Esenbel, Anne Janetta, Herman Ooms, Ronald Toby, and Karen Wigen.

### A Postscript

Authors of the various essays that have appeared in the last several issues of *EMJ* have endeavored to incorporate in their essays the publications that appeared between the conference and the time of publication; of these, I would like to take special note of Marcia Yonemoto's *Mapping Early Modern Japan: Space, Place, and Culture in the Tokugawa Period, 1603-1868*.<sup>12</sup> Her work clearly moves in a number of intellectual directions that reflect the desiderata of conference participants. To cite only some of the larger elements: She takes the era on its own terms, liberated from subservience to Tokugawa links to post-Restoration Japan. Comparison with the West plays a role in the study, but it does not become one-sided; it is balanced by comparison with those societies closest to Japan. Yonemoto creatively exploits materials (literary sources and maps most heavily) that have not been widely used by American scholars and, more importantly, often uses them in ways that Japanese scholars have not, expanding their utility beyond the boundaries of the disciplines that typically use these sources. (Literary sources are used to explore mental maps of Japan; maps are explored for what they reveal of elite conceptions of Japan's place in the world as well as in the context of scientific and technical development.) While not a biographical study, descriptions of her actors' reveal their polymath intellectual and professional lives. Their activities, and the broader description of her subject heighten awareness of regional and class variation in the way people perceived the Japan in which they lived. The highly literate (and even artistic) individuals Yonemoto analyzes clearly rank as members of the elite, yet the study focuses on their more everyday perceptions of their world, not their role in governance and generation of artifacts of "high" culture.

<sup>12</sup> Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Howard Hibbett, *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish: Japanese Humor Since the Age of the Shoguns*. Kodansha International, Tokyo, 2002. 208 pages. \$28.00, cloth.

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In *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish*, Howard Hibbett argues that the Japanese sense of humor has been unappreciated by both Japanese and Westerners, citing authorities as disparate as Arthur Koestler, who described Japanese humor as "astonishingly mild and poetical, like weak, mint-flavored tea" (p. 11) and Inoue Hisashi, who claimed that "on the whole Japanese people are serious" (p. 13). Hibbett challenges this assessment, arguing that Japan actually possesses a rich and varied comic tradition, making "the enormous corpus of Japanese literary humor, and of jokes, comic poetry, [and] recorded vestiges of oral storytelling" (p. 13) the subject of a book which is both amusing and informative.

The title is a parody of Ruth Benedict's famous 1946 study of Japanese cultural patterns, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Here, Hibbett pairs the chrysanthemum – Benedict's emblem of elite, aristocratic culture – with the fish, which he uses as an emblem of earthy, low culture, or in other words the comic. (The joke works in Japanese too: *sakana* [fish], though different semantically, has the same vowels as *katana* [sword], and hence is worth a bit of a chuckle.) He notes that the comic side of Japanese literary culture has been largely overlooked by scholars and excluded from the canon as well. Without attempting to offer a complex theoretical conceptualization of "humor" or facile generalizations about the Japanese "national character," Hibbett observes that the comic tradition in Japan is diverse and shaped by many forces, including regional and class differences, the interaction of literacy and orality, and changing social mores. His purpose is not to define Japanese humor, but to give readers some sense of its variety. While he does make frequent reference to humor in drama, *rakugo* storytelling, and other forms of performance, most of the discussion focuses on literary humor.

The first chapter presents an overview of Japanese humor from its earliest sources to its pre-